

Rules of the Game

More Magical Oddities (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Not long ago, it was my pleasure to appear as a guest at BashCon on the University of Toledo campus. While there, I had an opportunity to discuss the *Rules of the Game* web feature with a roomful of fans. Part of the discussion included an overview of last month's column on magical oddities in the D&D game. Based on what those fans had to say, it seems that last month's column left quite a few oddities unexamined. Here, then, are a few more.

Counterspells

A counterspell represents a potent option for any spellcaster who faces another **spell** user. Unfortunately, many players shy away from counterspells because they don't think they understand how counterspells work. That's a shame, because there isn't much to using a counterspell. You can find the rules governing counterspells on page 170 in the *Player's Handbook*. The counterspell rules are only a few paragraphs long, but here's a summary of the details, along with additional commentary.

- You can cast just about any spell as a counterspell. (See the Resolving Counterspells section and the notes below on counterspells as readied actions for some key exceptions.)

When you know how to cast a spell, you also know how to cast it as a counterspell. Casting a spell as a counterspell involves altering the spell slightly so that its magical energy suppresses and negates another spell rather than producing the spell's usual result.

Except where noted here, casting a counterspell works just like casting a spell. You must concentrate to cast a counterspell and your counterspell is ruined and wasted if something disrupts your concentration while you're casting. When you cast a spell as a counterspell, the spell is used up, just as if you had cast the spell normally. You also expend any material or **experience point** components the spell normally requires.

- In general, a spell can counter only itself.

For example, you use a *fireball* spell to counter another character's *fireball* spell. Variations on a spell cannot counter each other. For example, you cannot use a *fireball* spell to counter *delayed blast fireball* spell or vice versa.

Metamagic generally doesn't affect counterspells because a spell altered with a metamagic feat doesn't change a spell into a different spell. A maximized *fireball*, for example, is still a *fireball* and anyone can use a regular *fireball* spell to counter the maximized spell. You can even counter a spell altered with metamagic with the same spell that has been altered with a different feat. For example you might counter a maximized *fireball* spell with an enlarged *fireball* or a widened *fireball*.

Exceptions to these general rules abound. First, some spells naturally counter each other, such as *haste* and *slow*. Such pairings are noted in the spells' descriptions.

Second, the Improved Counterspell feat allows you to counter a spell with any higher **level** spell of the same school. With the Improved Counterspell feat, for example, you could use *delayed blast fireball* to counter a *fireball* spell because both spells are **evocation** spells and *delayed blast fireball* is a higher level spell than *fireball*. According to the [D&D FAQ](#), you can use the Heighten Spell feat to increase a **spell's level** for use with the Improved Counterspell feat. For example, the *fireball* spell is a 3rd-level evocation spell. *Shatter* also is an evocation spell, but it's only a 2nd-level spell. If, however, you use Heighten Spell to increase a *shatter* spell's level to at least 4th level, you can use it to counter a *fireball* spell if you also have the Improved Counterspell feat.

Finally, a *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell can be cast as a counterspell. See the Resolving a Counterspell section for details.

- You use the ready action to cast a counterspell.

A counterspell requires you to loose your magic at just the right moment to nullify another spell. To manage that trick, you must use the ready action, which is described on page 160 of the *Player's Handbook*.

Because the ready action is a **standard action**, you can move up to your **speed** either before or after you ready your counterspell (but not both). If you don't otherwise move during the turn you ready a counterspell, you can take a **5-foot step** either before or after you ready the counterspell or as part of the counterspell itself (but you're still allowed only one 5-foot step in a round). See [Rules of the Game: All About Movement](#) for details.

Since you use a standard action as a readied action (see the *Player's Handbook*), you should use a spell with a casting time of one standard action or less as a counterspell (but see the section on counterspell variants in Part Two).

- In most cases, you'll need to identify the spell your foe is casting before you can choose the correct counterspell.

You can identify any spell as it is being cast by making a **Spellcraft check** with a **DC** of 15 plus the spell's level. This does not require an action (see the Spellcraft skill description). You can make a Spellcraft check to identify a spell as it is being cast whenever you can see the caster performing the spell's somatic components (if any) or when you can hear the spell's verbal components (if any). The rules don't say so, but you also ought to be able to identify any spell as it is being cast if you can see the spell's material components (if any), provided that the material component is something unique to the spell. For example, if you note a ball of bat guano and sulfur in a spellcaster's hand, that's a good indication that a *fireball* spell is on the way. If your foe is wielding a holy symbol, however, that could indicate any number of divine spells.

In general, it's pretty easy to notice a spell's somatic, verbal, or material components as the caster uses them. When in doubt, however, the DM can call for a DC 5 Spot or Listen check (as appropriate) to note the component. Remember to apply check penalties for distance or other conditions as noted in the skill descriptions.

The rules don't come right out and say so, but since you must see a somatic (or material) component or hear a verbal component to identify any spell as it is being cast, you cannot identify a spell that doesn't have any verbal, somatic, or material components. An example of this is a silent and stilled spell that doesn't have a material component. This makes such spells difficult to counter (but see the next section).

Resolving a Counterspell

If you've selected the correct spell to counter another character's spell (by using the same spell cast as a counterspell, by using a spell that naturally counters the foe's spell [such as using *slow* to counter *haste*], or by taking advantage of the Improved Counterspell feat), the target spell is automatically negated. Neither your spell nor the other character's spell has any of its normal results. Instead, the two spells completely nullify each other.

If you decide to use a *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell as a counterspell against another spell, success isn't automatic. You target the other spellcaster with your *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell, and you must make a **caster level check** with a DC of $11 +$ the other spellcaster's caster level to successfully counter the other spell. If you use the *dispel magic* spell, your maximum bonus on your caster level check is +10, as noted in the spell description. If you use the *greater dispel magic* spell, your maximum **bonus** on your caster level check is +20, also as noted in the spell description.

It's possible to blindly counter another character's spell using a *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell as a counterspell. You simply skip the Spellcraft check to identify the other character's spell as it is being cast. Failing to identify the other character's spell has no affect on your chance to counter the spell.

The rules don't specifically say so, but you can use a *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell to counter any spell, even a spell that normally isn't subject to **dispelling**. For example, you could use a *dispel magic* spell to counter another character's *wall of force* spell. This works because when you use a counterspell, you're catching and disrupting the spell before it actually has any results.

You can also use a *dispel magic* spell or *greater dispel magic* spell as a standard counterspell against another *dispel magic* spell or *greater dispel magic* spell. In this case, you must first identify the opposing spell. If you succeed, you can counter the target spell normally, without making a caster level check.

There is no saving throw against a counterspell, nor does **spell resistance** apply to counterspells (because a counterspell affects the target spell, not the spell's caster).

The rules don't specifically say so, but you need to see or touch the other spellcaster to counter a spell (because the other spellcaster is your counterspell's target). You also need **line of effect** to the other spellcaster and the other spellcaster must be within range for the spell you're using as a counterspell. If your line of effect is blocked or you're out of range, your counterspell's magical energy cannot reach the other spellcaster and negate that character's spell. This means you cannot use a spell with a personal range as a counterspell (because the spell's range is limited to your person) under most circumstances. You still can counter another character's personal range spell, however, by using a *dispel magic* or *greater dispel magic* spell as a counterspell, or by taking advantage of the Improved Counterspell feat and using a spell with sufficient range to reach your opponent.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll look at various magical effects that negate or suppress each other, including the *dispel magic* spell.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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